

MISSISSIPPI FLYWAY COUNCIL POLICY MANAGEMENT OF MUTE SWANS

Introduction

This document briefly describes the history, status, selected biology, management concerns, and recommendations for the management of mute swans (*Cygnus olor*), a non-native, invasive species that has become established in several locations in the Mississippi Flyway (e.g., Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Ohio, Ontario, and Wisconsin). Although the populations are relatively low in most Flyway states, establishing and implementing a Flyway policy is important because the birds have high reproductive potential. The policy recommendations below represent the consensus of wildlife agencies in the Mississippi Flyway with respect to management of this species. The purpose of this document is to provide direction for the cooperative management of mute swans by natural-resource agencies in the Flyway.

Background

Introduction and Populations - Mute swans are native to Eurasia. Although once severely reduced in numbers by market-hunting and war within their natural range, they have been domesticated for centuries and are now widely distributed throughout Europe. The Eurasian population is estimated at 1 million. Mute swans were introduced into North America during the late 1800s as decorative waterfowl and have now established wild populations in all four Flyways due to escaped and released birds. Nelson (1997) estimated a population of 18,000 mute swans in North America, with most being in the Atlantic Flyway. By 2000, Nelson estimated a total of 6,800 mute swans in the Mississippi Flyway, with feral populations occurring in 9 of 16 states or provinces. Mid-winter inventories in the Mississippi Flyway indicate an average annual increase of 10% during 1991-2000.

Regulations - Mute swans were not protected under United States federal law until December 28, 2001, following a ruling by the U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia. The Court ruled that the Migratory Bird Treaty Act covers mute swans, and they should be included in the list of migratory birds protected under 50 CFR regulations. As a result of the ruling, control of mute swans by states or others will require a depredation permit from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Federal permits are now also necessary to legally take, possess, transport, sell, purchase, barter, and export mute swans. In Canada, all swan species are protected under the Migratory Bird Convention Act. Mute swans are protected under state regulations in 8 of the Mississippi Flyway states: AL, AR, IL, KY, MI, MS, OH, and WI. They are not protected in IN, IA, LA, MN, MO, and TN. In addition, they are classified as a regulated exotic species in MN.

Biology and Management Concerns

Mute swans are relatively sedentary and their nesting territories are relatively small compared to native North American swans. Mute swans feed extensively on aquatic vegetation such as *Potamogeton sp.*, *Chara sp.*, *Myriophyllum sp.*, and *Vallisneria americana*. Mute swans can build to relatively high densities on high-quality wetlands. They can alter vegetative communities and foraging is competitive with native wildlife. They aggressively defend their nesting territories against other wildlife such as loons, Canada geese, ducks, and other white water-birds (testimony at Wisconsin Natural Resources Board hearing on mute swan management). They may even kill birds and their young (Stone and Masters 1970, Reese 1980, Kania and Smith 1986). There is evidence that mute swans can compete with native trumpeter swans for foraging habitat. Mute swans have been responsible for numerous complaints involving attacks upon people, some of which resulted in personal injury (Michigan DNR files).

POLICY GUIDELINES

Management Goal

Maintain mute swan populations in the Mississippi Flyway at levels that will minimize or eliminate their harmful ecological impacts to native waterfowl species and habitats.

Objectives

- ✧ Reduce the Flyway population to 3,400 or fewer birds by 2010
- ✧ Prevent mute swans from establishing new breeding populations in areas where they do not currently exist.

Strategies

- ✧ Encourage states within the Flyway to:
 - ┆ Monitor populations of mute swans
 - ┆ Remove pioneering mute swans
 - ┆ Reduce existing mute swan populations
 - ┆ Set state mute swan population objectives
 - ┆ Discourage possession of captive mute swans unless pinioned and sterilized
 - ┆ Prohibit the release to the wild of captive and rehabilitated mute swans
 - ┆ Prohibit the sale or transfer of mute swans unless sterilized
- ✧ To comply with Federal Executive Order 13112, encourage the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to not take actions that would aid the spread of mute swans within the Flyway. The Service should specifically:
 - ┆ Not issue federal permits for the sale of mute swans unless the birds are pinioned and sterilized
 - ┆ Issue federal permits for mute swan removal
 - ┆ Adopt a federal depredation and/or conservation order to give states the authority to manage mute swans
 - ┆ Allow the taking of mute swans during authorized tundra swan hunting seasons
- ✧ Develop programs to raise public awareness about the threats from mute swans to native waterbirds, their habitats, and associated recreational use and appreciation
- ✧ Develop a Flyway-wide publication on mute swans (similar to Wisconsin's)

Literature Cited

- Kania, G.S. and H.R. Smith. 1986. Observations of agonistic interactions between a pair of feral mute swans and nesting waterfowl. *Connecticut Warbler* 6:35-37.
- Nelson, H.K. 1997. Mute swan populations, distribution and management issues in the United States and Canada. *North American Swans* 26 (2): 14-22
- Reese, J.G. 1980. The demography of European mute swans in Chesapeake Bay. *The Auk* 97:449-464.
- Stone, W.B. and A.D. Masters. 1970. Aggression among captive mute swans. *N.Y. Fish and Game Journal* 17:51-53